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Dalakoglou, D.

published in

International Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology
2018

DOI (link to publisher)

[10.1002/9781118924396.wbiea2187](https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118924396.wbiea2187)

document version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

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citation for published version (APA)

Dalakoglou, D. (2018). Roads. In *International Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology* (pp. 1-4). Wiley. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118924396.wbiea2187>

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Roads

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Roads and anthropologists

Traditionally, most anthropological work has been devoted to studying populations portrayed as antithetical to the dominant trends in modern, capitalist society. Highways and automobility were considered Western and modern elements, far from the ethnographic “other,” presenting a complicated subject for anthropologists. The widespread introduction of roads on a global level across the twentieth century sparked three distinct reactions within anthropology, which have been reflected in anthropological research on the subject: an underestimation of the effect roads would have; a disapproval of roads; and an enthusiastic reception of the newfound ease of access provided by roads.

First, many of the discipline’s ancestors underestimated (rather ineloquently) the impact of highways on the ethnographic “objects” of their studies. Most typically, E. E. Evans-Pritchard suggested that, although the Azande had changed their pattern of settlement by concentrating around the newly constructed roads—instead of streams, as they had before—he could not in fact ascribe to roads “any great change in the life of the Azande” (1932, 292). Highways, in the eyes of Evans-Pritchard, brought the imagined exotic “a few steps nearer” (1960, 311) to the nonexotic world. The phrase “a few steps nearer” was meant quite literally, as Evans-Pritchard’s anthropological subjects were mainly walkers (with a preference for walking barefoot), rather than drivers or passengers. Walking barefoot implied an *a priori* hierarchical classification of people, as Tim Ingold (2004) explains in his discussion of cultures characterized by walking versus those with a culture of vehicle mobility. Thus, Evans-Pritchard’s subjects were indeed barefoot—and hence closer to nature. They were passive receivers of change, unaffected by highways:

I am not concerned here with those changes, which were mostly imposed on the Azande and are—when I use the present tense the reference is to the years 1926–30—not regarded by them as part of their way of life but something to be passively accepted or to be circumvented or ignored. To give one example: though the Administration compelled them to maintain wide roads it was noticeable that when a group of Azande walked down them they did so in single file as they were accustomed to do along their bush paths. (Evans-Pritchard 1960, 311)

Second, there was in some respects an unspoken competition between ethnologists to reach the most isolated and remote places, and as such those peoples considered to be

The International Encyclopedia of Anthropology. Edited by Hilary Callan.

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DOI: 10.1002/9781118924396.wbiea2187

the most “primitive” and “exotic.” Early anthropological accounts are full of references to isolated subjects accessed by poor-quality (mostly preautomobile) roads. In 1884, Franz Boas observed that “the natives who had visited Padli in March had reported that the road was very bad; that the land was very nearly clear of snow and that the sledge would have to be carried over high rocks” (1884, 265). Claude Lévi-Strauss’s early ethnographic explorations in South America were equally explicit: “I occasionally took that step on horseback with some colleagues when we came to the end of one of the few roads available at the time” (Lévi-Strauss and Kussell 1971, 45). Moreover, Edmund Leach, in an interview with Adam Kuper (1986, 375), recalled his first ethnographic excursion in China, while still a civil engineer: “Chungking itself was still a mediaeval city, all steps and sedan chairs. No roads or motor vehicles except the odd half-disintegrated bus.” Even Paul Rabinow, a reflexive anthropologist, stated about his fieldwork that “the road for the first five miles is little more than a path—untarred, pitted, and winding and steep in places” ([1977] 2007, 44). Anthropologists who later focused their research on networked infrastructures were explicit about the difficult roads in their place of research. For example, Caroline Humphrey observed: “the road crosses a high mountain pass which is snowy even in midsummer, and plane tickets, unless booked months in advance, are obtainable only on a who-you-know basis” (1989, 6). In these cases, the journey to the sites of study, the difficulty of crossing nearly impassable roads, was part of their significance.

By the latter half of the twentieth century, ethnologists began to acknowledge that highways had marked the end of the semi-isolated, nonmodern people that had comprised the discipline for most of its history. The improvement and spread of roadways meant the loss of unstudied subjects. Thus, given the enthusiasm for (and informal competition to reach) remote places, many anthropologists grew to regret the success of roadways. As Lévi-Strauss explained, by the 1960s, roads already implied the end of isolated ethnographic subjects: “The establishment of the new federal capital of Brazil and the building of roads and aerodromes in remote parts of South America have led to the discovery of small tribes in areas where no native life was thought to exist” (1966, 125). Twenty years later, Michael Herzfeld (1986) was much more explicit about roads’ potential disruption to anthropological study, describing highways that “strangulate” the traditional practices of the ethnographic subject, in his case the practice of customary animal theft among Cretan villagers.

Finally, there was a recognition by anthropologists such as John Sorenson that the arrival of better roads and better access brought new opportunities; a more positive assessments of the roads that were reaching the once-isolated ethnographic subject began to emerge:

More than anything else, the completion of the jeep road opened up the Fore region, changing it almost overnight from an isolated region to one open to free travel and commerce and, more important, in contact with the outside world. ... The power of the road is hard to overestimate. It was a great artery where only restricted capillaries had existed before, and down this artery came a flood of new goods, new ideas, new peoples, and, above all, excitement. ... It was to the Fore an opening to a new world. (1972, 366)

Toward an anthropology of roads

Beginning in the 1960s, anthropologists started considering the idea that infrastructures were an important element of the anthropological project (Godelier et al. 1978; Harris [1968] 2001). These contributions were directly inspired by work on Marxist historical materialism and triggered a series of debates within the discipline. The authors of more recent scholarship on infrastructure owe a debt to the immense value these earlier works provide. Yet, those earlier works had a clear theoretical emphasis and lacked ethnographic depth, as is often the case with grand theoretical schemes in anthropology.

Although contemporary anthropologists are gradually embracing the infrastructures as a central theme within the discipline and are bringing a stronger empirical emphasis (e.g., Dalakoglou 2009, 2010, 2016; Dalakoglou and Harvey 2012; Harvey and Knox 2015; Humphrey 2005; Klaeger 2013; Larkin 2013; Roseman 1996; Selwyn 2001; Stewart 1996), still the leap to link the great theoretical potentialities and the empirical material is yet to happen. However, many necessary steps have been taken in that direction. If someone who studied roads as an ethnographic subject per se as recently as (say) 2008 had to stress that infrastructure should be treated as an autonomous anthropological and ethnographic subject and not a secondary topic, today this statement sounds banal. Anthropologists have made an explicit turn toward infrastructural formations, and a number of ethnographies of roads exist. Thus, the question that needs to preoccupy us in shaping an anthropological dromology is not how roads have come to the foreground of ethnographic research but how can we understand anew established anthropological categories of study and analysis, such as the house, kinship, migration, technology, and the imagination, in reference to these infrastructures.

SEE ALSO: Built Environment; Evans-Pritchard, E. E. (1902–73); Freud, Sigmund (1856–1939); Globalization; Landscape; Material Culture; Power, Anthropological Approaches to; States; Transport, Communications, and Infrastructure in International Development Contexts

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